

SUPPORTING THE TROOPS

Supporting Engineers

Story by
Andrew Stamer

Engineers recently went to Fort Irwin, Calif. to participate in a training exercise with one of the Army's new units of action.

The Forward Engineer Support Team, made up of engineers from Europe District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 249th Engineer Battalion "Prime Power", worked with Soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade Combat Team at the National Training Center. The purpose of the FEST was two fold - to show the 3rd BCT the Corps' capabilities in contingencies, and to conduct real life missions of the NTC's facilities.

FESTs are generally sent during the beginning of a contingency to augment a unit and set up Forward Operating Bases. Since these bases in Iraq and Afghanistan have been completed, the Corps is no longer sending FESTs.

However, the Corps does have USACE Support Teams. These teams are set up in area and field offices, but still serve much of the same purpose as an ingrained part of the Gulf Region Division in Iraq and the Afghanistan Engineer District.

The purpose of these teams, composed primarily of civilian volunteers, is to support the troops and aid in reconstruction of these countries.

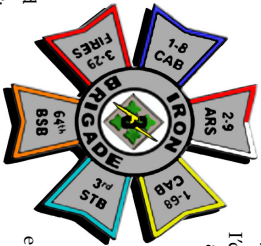
"We went (to NTC) with the intent to call ourselves a USACE Support Team, but we were operating like a FEST," said Capt. Lantz Timmsen, who was the FEST leader from the Europe District. The team had to adapt to the NTC's mission because "USACE Support Team"

is not a well-known phrase among Soldiers. However, the Soldiers from the 3rd BCT understood "FEST".

"We had to remind them that the structure would not be like this, but they would be able to call up offices (in Iraq) to do work in their areas," said Timmsen. This helped make the unit aware of the Corps' presence and how to use Corps' expertise to support the unit with its civil affairs, and other missions, when they head to Iraq in the December to January time frame.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, one to two person teams can be dispatched from the closest field offices to do assessments for deployed units.

At NTC, the FEST ran through the exercise to show how the Corps was value added as an augmentation to the unit.



"We'd run through scenarios and I'd have to go in with an interpreter and talk to the town engineer or the town mayor to do a SWEAT (sewage, water, electricity, academics and trash) assessment," he said of the towns at NTC, which are set up to be like Iraqi towns and staffed with Iraqis to add an extra element of realism.

"SWEAT is good because the engineers can provide simple means to improve the communities. Forward Operating Bases and towns are very close to each other and what they've found is that insurgents would move into these villages and attack and then move out again. By providing simple means to

improve communities, it creates a good rapport with the villagers so they help us and they don't allow insurgents to come into their villages and attack us," said Timmsen, who spent a year in Afghanistan before coming to Europe District.

Two civilians who also participated as part of the FEST, Fritz Ligday and Jonathan Carr, are both veterans of deployments. Carr deployed to Turkey when the military was building up near Iraq's northern border, and Ligday went into Iraq shortly after the end of major combat operations. As qualified Field Force Engineers, they have both been through a course which taught them how to use the latest technology for reachback to achieve success with their many and varied, missions.

"In Iraq, the bridges over the Tigris and Euphrates were being driven over by M1 Abrams. Our job was to measure and assess if these

bridges could take the sustained use of the M1s and Bradley's going over them," said Ligday.

They used their reachback capabilities to assess this safety. Reachback is an essential tool for engineers in a FEST, and they were able to use this capability to help with an overall drainage plan for Fort Irwin, said Timmsen.

This rotation was important because it was the first chance to see how a FEST would fit in with the new brigade combat team structure, said Ligday.

"What we were trying to do is to teach the unit what we can do for them in a contingency situation. But it also helps prepare them to know that we have some requirements like security and transportation," he said.

Many units don't know about these requirements at first, so this experience at NTC teaches the leadership about what the engineers will need when they go out on an assessment for the unit.

"We went to the NTC to help the guys prepare for deployment to Iraq. What they received were people who had experience from all different times during the war on terror," said Ligday.

The two Soldiers from the 249th Engineer Battalion also had experience in contingencies. "Prime Power" is the only active duty battalion in the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers



Capt Lantz Timmsen looks over notes taken during a Forward Engineer Support Team deployment to support troops readying to deploy to Iraq at the National Training Center and Fort Irwin, Calif.

Photo by Fritz Ligday

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